

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

11 June 2020

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Burrell, S.R. and Westmarland, N. (2019) 'The voices of male victims : understanding men's experiences of the Men's Advice Line.', Project Report. Respect, London.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.respect.uk.net/resources/55-the-voices-of-male-victims-understanding-men-s-experiences-of-the-men-s-advice-line>

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The voices of male victims: Understanding men's experiences of the Men's Advice Line

An evaluation for Respect UK

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October 2019

Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Research method.....	3
3. Findings	6
3.1 Contacting the helpline	6
3.2 Experiences of domestic abuse.....	9
3.3 Hopes and expectations	12
3.4 Experience of the helpline	15
3.5 Opportunities to improve the helpline.....	17
3.6 Difficulties for men.....	20
3.7 Improving services for men.....	23
4. Conclusions and recommendations	26
5. References.....	29
6. Annex I – Interview topic guide.....	29

Suggested citation:

Burrell, S.R. and Westmarland, N. (2019) The voices of male victims: Understanding men's experiences of the Men's Advice Line. An evaluation for Respect UK. London: Respect.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a qualitative research project which sought to hear the views of service users of the Men's Advice Line for male victims of domestic abuse. This was in order to gain insights into callers' expectations and experience of the Men's Advice Line, their help-seeking behaviours, and their perceptions of domestic abuse services more broadly. Based on these views, the report also includes recommendations for how the service provided by the Men's Advice Line can be improved in the future.

The interviews highlighted some of the challenges and complexities involved in running a helpline for male victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Some of these are the same as those that exist for support services for female victim-survivors of abuse, whilst others may be specific to men. Generally, however, despite these challenges, the men we interviewed gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the Men's Advice Line and the service provided by the helpline workers they spoke to.

A search for relevant academic literature to inform the research was carried out using the Google Scholar and Scopus bibliographic databases, however there appears to be very little existing research on helplines for male victims of violence and abuse. The lack of research and evaluation in this area highlights the value of services critically assessing their own work and indicates that Respect are at the forefront of developments in this field internationally by doing so.

This is underscored by other evaluations of the Men's Advice Line that have been carried out in recent years. Broad and Gadd (2014) conducted fifteen interviews with callers to the Men's Advice Line and found that they were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of contacting the helpline, commenting that they got what they needed, felt more confident as a result, and were helped to access other services. Broad and Gadd's research illustrated that there is limited understanding about male victimisation and of women using violence, which can make accessing services more difficult. For many of the callers, there was a focus on the struggles between managing an abusive relationship and protecting children from being exposed to conflict. They often sought help through a pathway of decision-making, considering their criminal, legal and financial options, and how these would impact on their children's welfare. Broad and Gadd also highlighted the tension in which some male callers may present themselves as being the victim of false allegations, which in turn may require advice about obtaining legal representation. However, the helpline may also need to emphasise the risks to male callers if they are behaving in abusive ways themselves and identify sources of support for them if they have been or have considered being violent towards their partners.

Meanwhile, Debbonaire carried out interviews with service users and interviews and observations with staff (2008), as well as a client satisfaction survey (2010). She similarly found that the majority of callers who participated in these evaluations were overwhelmingly positive about the service they received. Most took some form of action as a result of their call, and some remarked that they felt safer as a result. They also felt listened to and reassured that domestic abuse is unacceptable. Debbonaire found that the Men's Advice Line requires specialist skills and knowledge which would not be available within more generic services, highlighting the continuing need for this specialist helpline service. She noted that the helpline workers provide clear and accurate information about rights and services, and effectively use communication skills to manage calls in an appropriate, empathetic and respectful way. In addition, significant depths of understanding enabled helpline workers to interpret the complex situations the callers were sometimes in and respond to these effectively, in a way that prioritised and maintained a focus on the safety of victims.

This report starts by describing the research method used in this study, before moving on to discuss the findings from the interviews, including exploring what led service users to call and how they found making contact with the helpline; the experiences of domestic abuse that they discussed; interviewees' hopes and expectations about their call; their experience of the helpline service; opportunities for developing the helpline; difficulties encountered by men in coming forward about experiences of domestic abuse; and how services for male victims of violence and abuse more can be improved.

2. Research method

Thirty qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out between 8th May and 18th June 2019 with men who had contacted the Men's Advice Line. These interviews were all carried out by phone, with interviewees contacted within 2–3 weeks of their original call to the helpline. Callers were asked by helpline workers if they would be willing to take part in the evaluation, and if they said yes, their contact details (first name, phone number and/or e-mail address) were then passed onto the research team, as well as the times and methods which would be the safest and most convenient to contact them.

There was an important ethical issue here, in that the callers may still have been with an abusive partner who may not have been aware of them contacting the helpline. It was therefore important to follow the preferences given by interview contacts, and not to divulge information

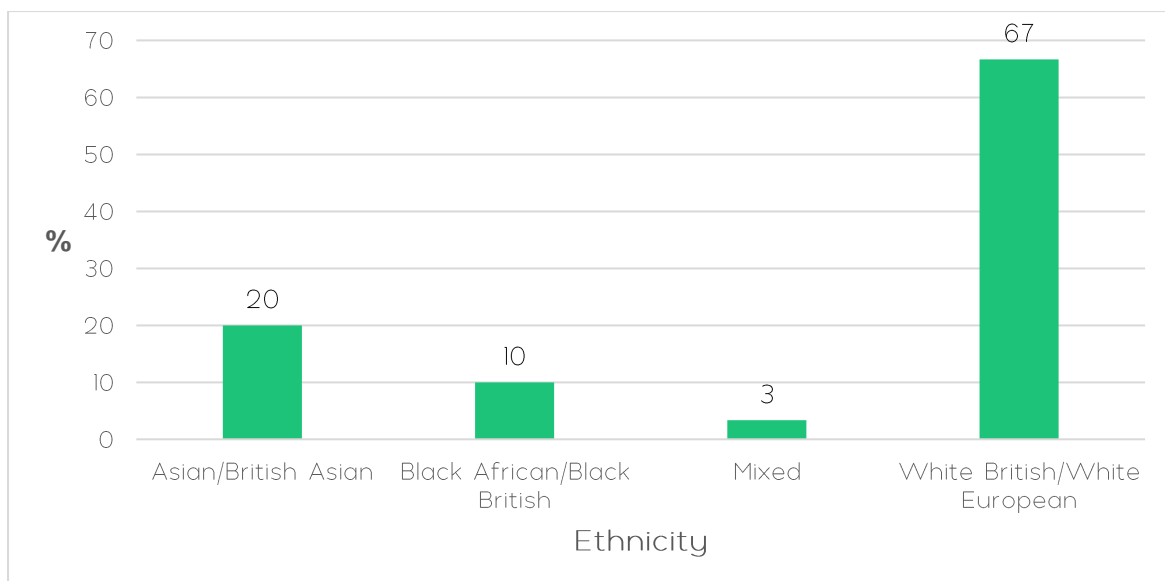
about the research (e.g. via a voicemail or text message) until it had been confirmed that we were speaking to the person that had contacted the helpline. The sensitivity of the subject matter also made it particularly important for us to ensure that participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. We conducted the interviews alone in a private space for this reason. Furthermore, it was anticipated that the interviewees might find it difficult to talk about their experiences, so they were encouraged to take a break, skip questions if needed, or to stop the interview if they were struggling to talk to us about the issues raised. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Durham University Department of Sociology Research Ethics Committee.

Callers were first contacted either by e-mail, text message, phone or voicemail depending on the preference they expressed in order to arrange a time to conduct the interview – or to carry it out there and then. The interviews typically lasted around twenty minutes, with the same topic guide used on each occasion (see annex). However, this was adapted (with the rephrasing of questions or use of prompts and follow-ups for example) if it was deemed helpful to probe particular comments or issues raised by participants further. The Men's Advice Line also runs an e-mail service and webchat, however we only spoke to callers who had contacted the helpline by phone, as this is the most in-depth service it provides and was best suited to phone-based interviews. To avoid making the interviewee feel too uncomfortable about sharing their experiences, rather than recording the conversations the interviewer took detailed notes of what the men were saying as the interviews progressed. This qualitative data was then thematically analysed by the research team.

We were successfully able to interview 45% of those individuals whose details were passed onto the research team. Most of the interviewees were calling about abuse from a female partner, whilst two discussed abuse experienced as a child and one talked about abuse from a male partner.

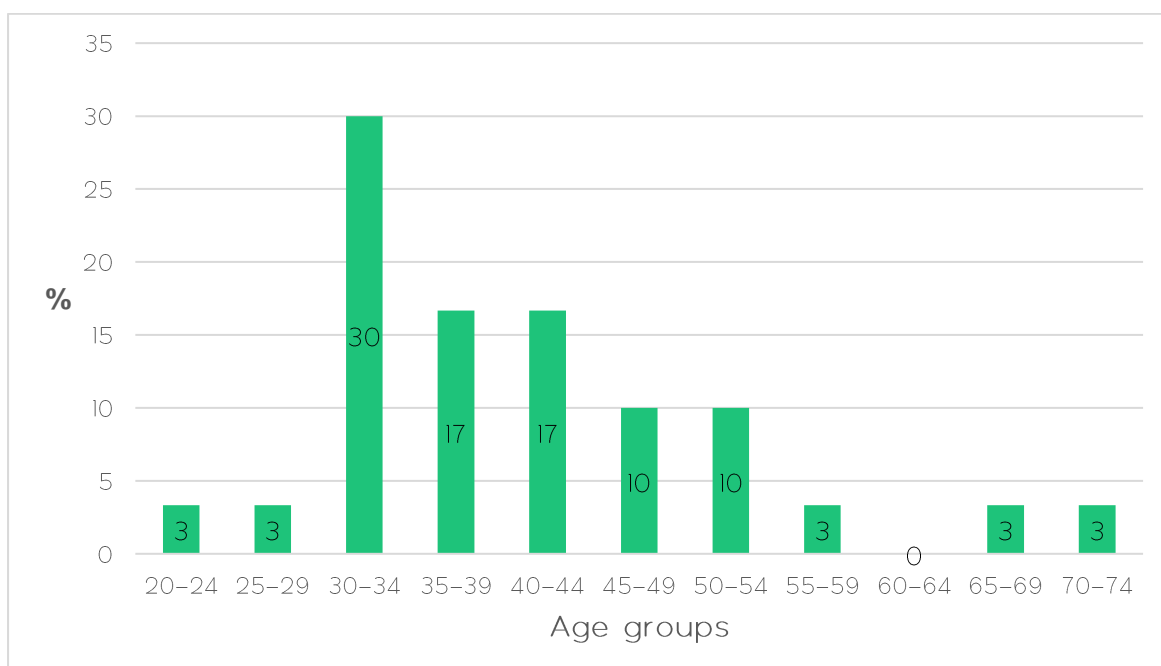
The sample was a relatively diverse group, as illustrated by the following graphs:

Graph 1 Ethnicity of interview participants



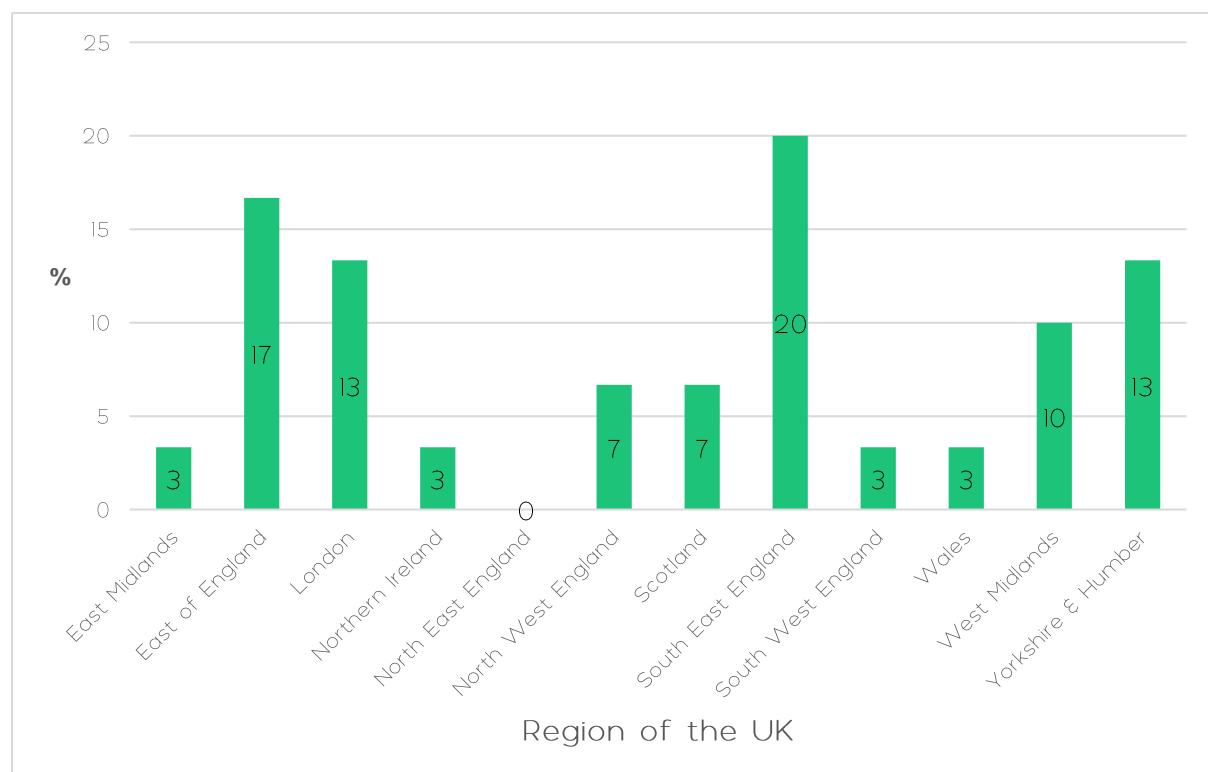
Graph 1 shows that the majority of interviewees defined themselves as being from a White ethnic background (twenty), whilst six said they were from an Asian background, three said they were from a Black background, and one said he was from a mixed ethnic background.

Graph 2 Age of interview participants



Graph 2 illustrates that the interviewees were a mixture of ages, ranging from 21 to 74. The majority were in the middle-aged bracket, with the largest amount (nine interviewees) being aged between 30 and 34.

Graph 3 Location of interview participants



As is demonstrated by Graph 3, the interviewees were based across the UK, with the largest amounts living in South East England (six) or the East of England (five). At least one interviewee lived in each of the different regions of the UK apart from North East England, which was the only region not represented in the sample.

3. Findings

The thirty interviews we conducted yielded a range of interesting and important findings both about the Men's Advice Line specifically and men's experiences of seeking support as victim-survivors of domestic abuse more broadly. These findings have been organised into key themes, which are discussed in turn below.

3.1 Contacting the helpline

For many of the men we interviewed, it was the first time they had spoken to someone about their experiences of domestic abuse. This highlights the importance of the service delivered by the Men's Advice Line, in providing a space through which men can first open up, talk to someone

and try to make sense of their experiences – especially given the significance of the response that victim-survivors receive when they first tell someone about what has happened to them. Several interviewees said that it had taken them some time to pluck up the courage to contact the helpline:

'First I had to grow a set of balls to call it in the first place! I was worried about not being taken seriously. It took about two weeks for me to eventually call. But I was able to get through right away. This was the first time I had talked about my experiences – I had been bottling everything up.'
(Interviewee 3)

The interviewees became aware of the Men's Advice Line through a number of different routes. For many of the men, it was discovered through online search engines, after entering terms such as 'domestic abuse':

'Just a search through Google. Since I then, having known about the Men's Advice Line, lots of other things that I've Googled and tried to find info about, have come up with the Men's Advice Line again. So that's good – it has come up a lot so it's clearly well advertised. But yeah, it was through Google that I found it.' (Interviewee 19)

Meanwhile, several of the interviewees had been made aware of or referred to the Men's Advice Line by another service such as the police, Citizens' Advice, or a service specifically for female victims of domestic abuse, such as the National Domestic Violence Helpline. It was also not necessarily the only service or helpline that was contacted by interviewees, with some also contacting the Mankind Initiative Helpline for example. In addition, for some of the interviewees this was not the first time they had contacted the Men's Advice Line.

Many of the interviewees did feel that more could be done to raise awareness among men that the Men's Advice Line exists, because they were not aware of it previously or had found it difficult to gain information about it for example:

'I think it was, I can't remember how now, just online, just through searching for what to do in certain situations. There should be a lot more awareness really, a lot of people don't know that there is advice out there.' (Interviewee 27)

Generally, the interviewees commented that they were able to get through to the Men's Advice Line relatively quickly and at a time that was convenient for them:

'It was really easy. The service was excellent. I got through within ten minutes, and I called from work so the opening

hours during the day were fine. The other person was very easy to talk to, they were non-judgemental, and listened to all way through.' (Interviewee 8)

However, this was not universally the case, and several did discuss experiencing some problems or delays in getting through to a helpline worker:

'Yeah, the first time I called I got straight through. I have tried a few times since then, and sometimes it's been quite difficult to get through, especially in the mornings, it seems to be more difficult in the mornings, so I tend to call in the afternoons. The opening hours are suitable for my needs though.' (Interviewee 11)

One problem raised by some of the interviewees here was how, after being put on hold for a certain period of time, the call would eventually hang up and they would lose their place in the queue in the process. If they wanted to persist in waiting, they would therefore have to call again and start from the beginning of the queue, which some felt frustrated about:

'My main concern was that, I rang the number, and it rang for about 10 times or something, and then it cut me off, saying please call again. So, I rang again, and it said I was at the top of the queue, but then it cut me off again. So, I called again, and then the 3rd or 4th time, it said I was I was 3rd in the queue. So instead of cutting me off, I should have been kept at the front of the queue. So, I had to keep ringing them. So that was a point I made – sometimes I call other helplines, such as the Samaritans, and they let you keep ringing. So, it's just frustrating, especially if someone is calling them urgently about something. Because it's just messing you about basically, so that was a bit annoying.' (Interviewee 18)

Some of the interviewees were also critical of a time limit being placed on calls, believing that this could mean that the call might have to be arbitrarily cut short even if they were in the middle of an important or difficult conversation:

'I got through quickly, but it is time boxed for half an hour. That's a constraint that should be lifted. Obviously if it's a service with a limited resource, and lots of people want to use it, I understand, but it's not conducive to you opening up, when you're being timed. I get the practicalities, but similar services probably offer a bit longer, like an hour.' (Interviewee 28)

Most were happy with the opening hours for the helpline, however several did feel that it would be helpful to have it open for longer hours during non-working hours such as evenings and weekends:

'So so, but it's only open at certain times, which is more complicated for me because I work. So, the opening hours could be improved – because I'm working, it was complicated for me to get through.' (Interviewee 24)

Opening more at evenings and weekends was highlighted as being particularly important for a service aimed at men, many of whom may be at work during weekdays. However, some of the interviewees also expressed understanding that these issues are connected to resource availability and may therefore to some extent be beyond the control of the helpline itself.

3.2 Experiences of domestic abuse

The interviewees described experiencing a range of different aspects of domestic violence, including physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and financial abuse. In several cases, they discussed the harmful, traumatising, oppressive impacts these experiences had been having on them and their lives:

'I've been in a relationship for 8 years or so. But I didn't realise that there was a bit of domestic violence going on, coercive and controlling behaviour, accusing me of different things, so when it came to...what do you call it now, I can't remember, battery anyway, she got me in a headlock, and pulled me off the settee, so it's domestic abuse, you know.' (Interviewee 20)

As this quote indicates, sometimes interviewees discussed experiencing coercive and controlling behaviours at the hands of their partners, of the kind that would fit the definition of 'intimate terrorism' described by Johnson (2006). For example, some of talked about being marginalised from friends and family by their partners and experiencing a sense of isolation as a result.

However, many of the men also described very complicated situations within their relationships, which may have pointed to a more complex picture akin to what some have called 'situational couple violence' for example (Johnson, 2006), or potentially 'mutually' violent or abusive behaviours. Indeed, several of the interviewees said that their partner or her family/friends had reported that the interviewee had been abusive towards her (the alleged perpetrator) and had reported that the interviewee

was the primary perpetrator of the violence. Generally, the participants described these reports as being false and malicious. These issues are illustrated in the following two quotes:

'I get the feeling that it's kind of geared, probably rightly, towards women being the victims of domestic abuse. I don't know the stats. But I certainly know my ex-partner could start bandying around the accusations, and it's been used against me, she accused me, of domestic abuse, with no documentation. But I know her doctor has said, I'd definitely abused her, but even if the doctor did say that, that's supposed to be a confidential environment, she shouldn't have then said that. So, people are primed, to blame the man. But that's just from my one experience, I don't know whether that's true more broadly, but I feel like I've been very easily branded as the bad guy.' (Interviewee 22)

'I know some people go to these charities and make up stories, without solid proof, they just make up allegations. And from my own experience, I know my ex-wife ended up making counter allegations, and she was using one of the charities to give a supporting statement. And I was like, c'mon guys, I could tell anybody anything. So that didn't happen with the Men's Advice Line, but is that something that the Men's Advice Line could give, just like evidence that I contacted them, and asked for help. I'm veering towards this family issue because it gets very messy, because it's domestic violence, there's lots of allegations and counter-allegations. As part of the emotional support, what was helpful, was that they did give me emotional support – although there is a perceived bias against men, maybe it's true, it's good to hold my ground as I said.' (Interviewee 23)

This highlights the challenges involved for helpline workers in attempting to discern the facts about the situation that the interviewee is calling about, given the possibility that some callers may in fact be perpetrators of abuse, and could be using the call as an attempt to legitimise the idea that they are the 'real' victim. Helpline workers must therefore attempt to respond to callers in a way which advises them appropriately and signposts them to relevant services, without on the one hand minimising or undermining their reports of being the victim, or on the other colluding with what may sometimes actually be an attempt by men to hide their own abusive behaviour. Furthermore, helpline workers have to do this based on very limited information received over the phone from one party in the situation. However, there was no indication that any of the interviewees were unhappy with the service they had received in this regard, as none of

them suggested that they felt they had been disbelieved, not taken seriously or misdirected by the helpline for example.

Meanwhile, in a few cases, interviewees only explicitly discussed behaviour from their partners which in and of itself may not have been abusive, but potentially more reflective of unequal distribution of power within the relationship for example. It is possible that these callers simply didn't wish to go into details about the more harmful behaviours that they experienced. However, their comments highlighted that perceptions and experiences within relationships are heavily influenced by wider gender norms, expectations and inequalities. Within that context, if there is a heterosexual relationship in which more power is held in some ways by the woman, or where she does not conform to certain gendered expectations, these sometimes appeared to be perceived as being abusive. For instance, one man described his partner not wanting to have sex with him and not being emotionally supportive as constituting abuse:

'I had to get out, I was utterly depressed, and understanding my wife's situation, if she wasn't going to get help, I had to think through it, and had to think of it more like a business relationship. I had to treat sex and cuddles as a business arrangement, as a reward rather than something I could look forward to. Rather than something a husband has a right to. Not that he does have a right to it, I would never force my wife to have sex. But women don't necessarily have the right to treat it only as a reward either. It should be somewhere in between, as part of a loving relationship. It's tough.'
(Interviewee 1)

This underscores the complex nature of working with men who are reporting experiences of violence and abuse from a female partner within a gender-unequal society. In this context, men and women may have very different expectations about relationships and what is healthy, normal or appropriate behaviour within them. On occasion, these may in turn lead to different, and potentially confused or misdirected perceptions of what constitutes abusive behaviour. Indeed, some of the men expressed beliefs which conformed to wider patriarchal gender norms, or which seemed to be influenced by sexist or misogynistic attitudes.

'Society has changed, women rule the world now. My granddaughter, who is 8, was dancing around the other day, and she was saying women rule the world. Women think they are a superior race now, there's no respect, girls and young women have no respect, for males anymore. They just manipulate, use and abuse males. They use them for a sexual experience, to get one over their mates, they have no

understanding of love, compassion, humility, and respect for males.' (Interviewee 17)

These issues raise the question of what coercive control looks like when it is experienced by a man and perpetrated by a woman. Stark (2007, 2009) theorised coercive control as being rooted within patriarchy and male dominance over women, so can it be applied in the same way, differently, or at all, to help understand men's experiences of violence and abuse? It is notable that whilst many of the interviewees did appear to be highly affected and upset about what they had experienced, few of them talked about feeling frightened about their partners or former partners for example.

These points are not intended to undermine or minimise in any way the men's reports of violence and abuse from female partners. However, they do illustrate the importance of taking into account the wider context of gender inequality and how that might influence different cases in different ways. This remains important even when dealing with individual cases of men being abused by women which do not reflect broader societal patterns of gender inequality.

Some of the interviews also highlighted the role that other social inequalities, such as those based around ethnicity, class, sexuality and disability can play in compounding domestic abuse. For instance, one interviewee talked about how his partner made use of wider racist social discourses about Asian people against him:

'To be honest with you, I know that Pakistani Asians have a bad reputation in the UK. But my wife uses that, saying I'm a terrorist and this or that. Using that against me to arrest me when I haven't done that, using racist language against me. She says that you're going to see the consequences.'
(Interviewee 6)

Another pointed out that people with disabilities might sometimes need additional help and explanations when seeking support, yet this is often not available:

'For people with disabilities, it can be quite difficult, to get someone to sit there and go through everything with you.'
(Interviewee 14)

3.3 Hopes and expectations

Many of the interviewees said that they did not have any specific expectations in advance of contacting the Men's Advice Line. They often

appeared to simply be hoping to receive some initial support and advice – someone to talk to, and someone who would be willing to genuinely hear their experiences:

'Just to talk about it really...it's quite a sensitive subject, I've never really talked to anyone about it before. I got to the stage of wanting to talk to someone, I'd already spoken to some family, but wanted to speak to an expert, in the area. It was good, I spoke to him for about 10 minutes, 15 minutes. It wasn't a cure or anything, but good to talk about it, it's a really useful line. I did find it quite difficult to find someone to talk to though – I don't know if it's a, regular thing for men to go through, apparently it is, but it's not an easy thing to talk about.' (Interviewee 13)

This factor seemed to be key – many of the men said that they were simply hoping to speak to someone who would listen to them, in a non-judgmental, compassionate and understanding way. Overwhelmingly, the interviewees reported that these hopes and expectations were successfully met by the helpline workers:

'It was more just to get an idea on, potential courses of action, that I could take moving forward. This is a very new situation for me, I've never experienced anything like this before, so I was just looking for...I've got the grounds to take things down a legal route, but I wasn't sure if that would be necessary, or beneficial. So, I was getting their advice, on you know, almost like a sounding board, about things that I could do moving forward.' (Interviewee 22)

Several of the men also discussed how they were hoping for confirmation about their experiences from the helpline workers, who they saw as being a 'neutral' or 'expert' voice that might be able to provide some clarity and a different perspective for them. This often appeared to be the case when callers were unsure about whether their experiences could be classified as being domestic abuse:

'I suppose it was some sign-points, of where to go, what to do. In my situation, it was a sense of, am I in a domestic violence type situation or not. And that, unknown...and the questions that they answered were very useful, in finding that out. So yes, my hopes were met. It was, a very softly spoken, compassionate chap on other end of the line.' (Interviewee 19)

However, some of the interviewees also described how they were seeking more specific advice and guidance, including around practical or legal issues, which the helpline was not necessarily in a position to be able to provide:

'There was, in terms of emotional support that was good. But I was also searching for, I don't know if this was the right place to call, but also more practical help, in terms of legal help, advice on legally where I stand. Because I also have a daughter. I don't know if my expectations were too high, in terms of what they offer. But my expectation was, to call them, get some emotional support, and I got some advice on what to do next, but I was also expecting more in the way of legal advice. I think that's what most people in this situation would want, how to protect themselves, how do I make sure I still have access to my daughter, how do I keep my daughter, going forward. So legal and technical help, as well as the emotional support.' (Interviewee 16)

Some of the men appeared to feel quite frustrated about this, suggesting that it may be beneficial to make it more clear in promotional material and to services that refer men to the Men's Advice Line exactly what it does, what it can and cannot provide, and the limitations of the advice that it can give:

'I'm not blaming you guys, but when the copper gives you your number, you expect solid help. You can't really do that – someone to sit down next you and help you and guide you through things. You need to make it clear to the police, this is what we can do, this is what we can't do, and be honest about what it is you can do. The police were saying you could do a lot to be honest.' (Interviewee 14)

This may also point to a potential gendered factor in providing a helpline service for men, who may find it hard to talk in depth about their experiences or ask for emotional support and may feel more comfortable focusing on practical issues and challenges and how they can be overcome:

'It was informative, and I felt better afterwards, but, and it may just be a limit of their provision, but there weren't any sort of clear, sort of judgments made, to move forward. It was very much, they couldn't give me, firm advice, they could just say, roughly, what they thought. I don't know, it wasn't like it was a clear advice line, it was sort of, it felt like they couldn't say too much, perhaps they didn't know the situation well enough. It was useful, but it wasn't everything I was looking for. So, they weren't able to meet all my expectations, they kept asking me, what do YOU think you could do moving forward, but that was why I called them, because I don't know what to do. It wasn't totally useless, but it wasn't as proactive as it could've been, but I

don't know if that's because of what their limitations are.'
(Interviewee 22)

3.4 Experience of the helpline

Overall, the interviewees were highly positive about their experience of contacting the Men's Advice Line. This is reflected in the response given when they were asked how satisfied they were with the response they received on a scale of one to ten, with the mean, mode and median score calculated from the thirty interviews all equalling **eight out of ten**. Five interviewees gave a score of ten, seven gave a score of nine, eight gave a score of eight, five gave a score of seven, and one interviewee each gave scores of six, five and four out of ten.

Several of the interviewees described how simply having the opportunity to share and talk about their experiences and having them validated by another person (and particularly one who was seen as being 'neutral' or an 'expert') felt like a significant positive step for them in and of itself.

'I called almost as an act of desperation. I don't usually talk about my problems or feelings with anyone else, so it felt like a massive step forward just to speak to someone, that was really helpful. I haven't heard from other services though. One service which I contacted, which would've been best port of call, hasn't contacted me back yet and it was over a week ago that I called.' (Interviewee 8)

'It was just, just good to have someone a little bit away from the situation who could give me honest, open advice.'
(Interviewee 9)

Some of the men talked about the significant positive emotional impact it had on them to receive support and compassion from another person, perhaps for the first time, about what they were experiencing:

'What she said, and the way she said it, the feeling of warmth and understanding that she gave me, it choked me up it was so powerful. It really picked me up off floor.'
(Interviewee 1)

'I guess it gave me like, something to think about, to contemplate after the call was over, to try and, regulate my thinking. One of the situations I think, for me personally, in situations like this with men – your self-worth is not great, and it can often help, when someone reassures you that you're worth something, or at least discourages you from

doubting yourself so much. So, I'd say that was something I came away with to some extent.' (Interviewee 28)

Interviewees also suggested that the helpline workers were highly skilled in making them feel able to talk openly, without shame or embarrassment about their experiences:

'I think it's one of the very few times when, in the midst of the situation I was in, it felt like someone was compassionate. And listened, and wasn't at all judgemental. And okay they're loaded towards that situation in every client that calls up, but that made it very friendly and very safe. It quite significantly helped me to speak. It was probably the first time that I'd ever really discussed what was going on. Prior to that, I had spoken a little bit to family, and to connections at church, but hadn't really been able to have a language-base to be able to express, what that was.' (Interviewee 19)

Many also discussed receiving helpful advice from the helpline worker about their situation and what they could do about it:

'Two things happened. One, a sympathetic and understanding and non-judgmental, listener, and there's no real magic wand solution, but he gave me practical pointers, which was very, I'm a very logical person, therefore the practical pointers, about the protecting of myself, were very much appreciated.' (Interviewee 17)

Most of the interviewees also reported taking a range of different actions as a direct result of contacting the helpline. This included taking steps such as contacting a local support service, speaking to a solicitor, ending the relationship, or moving out of the accommodation they shared with their partner or former partner:

'I did. I sought counselling. Yeah that was a direct result of the call, so it was really good.' (Interviewee 12)

'Yeah, I've spoken to my doctor, who sent me a link, to a local support group, they must be a charity, where they give help, advice, support. So that was one aspect, the other was, they advised me to speak to my daughter's school, and make them aware of what's going on, so I have done that now too.' (Interviewee 16)

'Yes I have, yeah, getting some sort of information about, some confirmation rather, that it wasn't, irrational to be thinking the way I am thinking, feeling the way I am feeling, and they helped me to reach out to a local service, around

domestic abuse, that I haven't met with yet, but I am making some progress with it.' (Interviewee 26)

3.5 Opportunities to improve the helpline

In terms of how to develop and improve the service provided by the Men's Advice Line in the future, some of the interviewees mentioned that it was important to ensure that it always had as up-to-date information as possible about referral routes and local support services. This was because sometimes helpline workers could not provide much information about local services (possibly because none existed in some cases), or the information they did provide was on occasion inaccurate, because a service had subsequently closed down for example. There was some recognition however that this can be difficult given the constantly shifting nature of local support services and the impact of government policies leading to some struggling to survive or closing down due to lack of funding for instance.

'He gave me telephone numbers of lawyers valid for domestic violence assistance, but one of them hadn't done that in over a year. I know it's quite difficult, because obviously there is a register, but there's no law which says that the register has to be accurate.' (Interviewee 14)

Another issue raised about how to improve the Men's Advice Line related to some of the difficulties experienced in getting through to it on occasion, discussed in section 3.1. Some of the interviewees felt that any time restrictions on calls should be removed, or at least extended, to ensure that callers could talk about everything they wanted to and that conversations were not cut-off arbitrarily after a time limit had been reached. Meanwhile, some felt that the queuing system for the helpline should be changed, so that callers would not be hung up on or lose their place in the queue after a certain period of time, and were able to wait for as long as they wanted to for the helpline to become available – or to at least be warned from the outset that there was a time limit on queuing:

'The only thing I'd say is, because I've been struggling to get through, they put you in a queue, and then they just cut you off, after about five minutes, saying all our advisors are busy, please call back another time, and you lose your place. So, they should either say that message straight away, so you're not left waiting, or say you're in the queue and just let you wait until you do get to speak someone.' (Interviewee 11)

'My main concern was that, I was, I rang the number, and it rang for about 10 times or something, and then it cut me off, saying please call again. So, I rang again, and it said I was at the top of the queue, but then it cut me off again. So, I called again, and then the 3rd or 4th time, it said I was I was 3rd in the queue. So instead of cutting me off, I should have been kept at the front of the queue. So, I had to keep ringing them. So that was a point I made – sometimes I call other helplines, such as the Samaritans, and they let you keep ringing. So, it's just frustrating, especially if someone is calling them urgently about something. Because it's just messing you about basically, so that was a bit annoying.'
(Interviewee 30)

Another suggestion given by some of the interviewees was the initiation of some form of 'follow-up' system, in which people who had called the helpline could be contacted a certain amount of time after their original call (if they were happy for this to happen), to check how they were doing. This was felt to be important and potentially beneficial because of how difficult it might be for some men to take the step to get in touch with the helpline and open up about their experiences, only to then potentially have to deal with the issues it had raised for them on their own. In the words of one interviewee:

'A follow-up phone call would do. For men, we find it hard to come out, to say this is what I'm going through. If a man is bold enough to do that, it would be good if you could ask them if you could phone them again, to catch-up, and check how they're doing. Most people will try once and then give up. A follow-up call, before it's handed over to the police or other services for example, would show that these people do care.' (Interviewee 4)

Again however, there was some recognition that these kinds of improvements were to some degree dependent on the resources available for the helpline. Some of the participants also mentioned that it might be helpful to provide more information on the Men's Advice Line website about domestic abuse and men's experiences where appropriate. It was suggested that this could include a 'Frequently Asked Questions' section about issues often raised by callers for example, or some form of self-assessment questionnaire to help people make sense of what they might be going through and what behaviours might be considered unhealthy or inappropriate within a relationship. Of course, there are limits to how appropriate or useful this kind of generic information could be, but some of the interviewees did appear to feel that it might raise awareness, help men to understand their experiences, and potentially encourage them to take the next step of calling the helpline and seeking help.

The interviews also highlighted the highly skilled and challenging nature of this work, and how important it is that helpline workers are trained to a high standard. Generally, the men appeared to be very happy with the support they received from the Men's Advice Line workers. Several felt that it was important to receive what they saw as a 'personal touch' from helpline staff, in addition to any professional support and advice that they might have required. This seemed to allude to a sense that they were being taken seriously and listened to empathetically as an individual, and that the helpline worker genuinely cared about their problems and what they had to say. For instance, interviewees commented that:

'The guy was great and everything, but maybe I expected a bit more in the way of...it's hard to describe. A woman's touch. I mean I phoned up the other helpline, and spoke to a woman, and she was saying things like, you shouldn't have to go through things like that. He was concerned, because I went to the police, so he was concerned about why I didn't press charges and things – he ticked all the boxes, he did everything he needed to do, but different people want different things. A more gentle approach maybe, it's hard to put into words. I suppose, I can't fault him, it's just constructive criticism, he didn't do anything wrong. When you're in shock and things, you want to be reassured that you're not alone, that this happens to other people too, that kind of thing, and he probably did do a bit of that, I'm just trying to give you a gist of it.' (Interviewee 20)

'They don't always seem chatty, one is very chatty, but the other three are very quiet, so you can sometimes feel like no one's listening, if they're not being very responsive, it's not much of a two-way conversation at all. Which I would prefer.' (Interviewee 21)

'I'm just nit-picking here, but there was a, couple of times during the call when, I was being sort of, talked over, which wasn't a big deal, and the connection on the phone line probably didn't help, but I'd prefer not to have this happen. But that was just minor, nit-picking. It was the only somewhat negative thing that stuck in my mind. But it was very, very helpful, still a fantastic service, and I plan to use it again.' (Interviewee 26)

These comments demonstrate the importance of communication and listening skills on the part of helpline workers as well as knowledge of how to handle disclosures relating to domestic abuse. However, such comments may also on occasion have reflected unrealistic expectations about the level of support that is appropriate for the Men's Advice Line to provide, because

if helpline workers commented too much this might compromise their ability to listen to the caller's experiences in a non-judgemental fashion. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the interviewees appeared to be very happy with their experience of the helpline in terms of both advice and support, suggesting that helpline workers for the Men's Advice Line are delivering the service to a very high standard and are well trained to undertake this complex and difficult, highly specialist work, as they are required to be.

3.6 Difficulties for men

A recurring issue brought up within many of the interviews was how difficult men find it to talk about domestic violence and other forms of abuse, especially in relation to their own experiences. The interviewees suggested that they often found it very hard to take the step to ask for help, to recognise that they were having problems, or to admit that they were experiencing abuse, in part because these are not seen as 'manly' things to do:

'For a long time I didn't ask for help with my mental health, because I think society in general thinks men should just deal with their problems themselves rather than asking for help. It is slowly getting better though, there's a lot more coverage in terms on men's mental health now.' (Interviewee 11)

The interviewees' comments pointed to how it can challenge dominant expectations of masculinity for a man to be a victim in the first place, or to admit that they are vulnerable or in need of help. This means that gender norms can inhibit men from recognising that they need support or from taking the steps to seek it out, because they may believe that doing so means that they are in some way 'weak' and failing to live up to expectations of what it is to be a man – or that they will be seen in this way:

'There's been an awareness in the media recently which has helped. But it's a challenge to sort of, to talk about it, a challenge of people's perception, of what's going on. I think because it's, not been the traditional, abuse situation, and then people have this expectation that as a man, you're physically stronger, or potentially physically stronger, or more likely to be abusive, or whatever. I think there's, an idea that a man wouldn't ask for help, but a woman would. I think the truth is that men find it harder to ask for help. I'm a particular type of person, so that admitting that I haven't been able to self-fix something, was tied up with that

aspect of masculinity, being an alpha male, whatever it is, it connects with our masculinity. I think it's part of the expectation, very few people, have any reference points, they haven't got an understanding of where to go, what it could be, they haven't got any prior experience of it.'
(Interviewee 19)

It is perhaps because of this that some of the men feared that they would be disbelieved, mocked or ridiculed in some way if they opened up about being a victim of domestic abuse – and perhaps especially if the perpetrator was a woman, who they might be expected to be more powerful than, and where they might be expected to be able to simply stop the abuse if they wanted to. One interviewee suggested that for these reasons, he actually preferred to talk to a woman on the helpline:

'I found it easier to talk to a woman about it than I would a man. I think more women can relate to it, can relate to things which have happened to them. They are probably more knowledgeable about it, I know it sounds bad. Men have these expectations of themselves to be this tough macho person, though not everyone's like that, everyone's different, but that can make it harder in that sense.' (Interviewee 2)

Men's experiences as victims and survivors in some ways challenge our understandings and expectations of domestic abuse, in which the majority of cases are based upon men's violence against women. Whilst this is by far the most pervasive form of domestic abuse, it is also the pattern which conforms to traditional gendered norms and expectations. Several of the interviewees described fearing that they might not be believed about their experiences as a result, especially if they were reporting abuse from a female partner – although they did not describe this as being the case when they spoke to the Men's Advice Line:

'Yeah, I think it's harder, first of all it's, there's less help available when you do contact somebody, and second people don't think to contact somebody because they think people won't believe them. Yeah 'cus I mean, what it is, I think the reason for that is, in life, all you hear about is, domestic violence, domestic abuse towards women, from a man, but you never hear it, the other way round. When it happens to men, they keep quiet, they don't tell people, whereas women do. So yeah, I hesitated, I thought that, I thought that the situation would sound a bit ridiculous, yeah just think it would I would be laughed at. Because I'm a man.'
(Interviewee 27)

Indeed, several of the men felt there to be a 'gender bias' against men within public services and the justice system (for instance, within the

family courts), in which it is assumed that men are always the perpetrators of abuse and that it is always best for women to care for and have the custody children, for instance. However, sometimes this appeared to be a perception rather than something necessarily based on any experiences, with fewer actual examples given of the preferential treatment they felt women received. Indeed, at times it appeared that the interviewees and their views had been strongly influenced by wider adversarial discourses in society in relation to these issues, such as those advocated in relation to male victims of domestic abuse by some men's groups, organisations and campaigns:

'I guess the fact that I've, I felt a bit isolated, because I'm a guy, so you hear things like, if you go to court guys always get the wrong end of the stick. I guess it's the same thing as domestic violence, but the other way round.' (Interviewee 23)

However, these views were not universal among the interviewees – some did recognise that the majority of victims of domestic abuse are women and that this inevitably shapes the delivery of services in this area. In addition, some of the men did recognise that women also experience many difficulties in coming forward about experiences of abuse, and that all victims of domestic violence have many issues and struggles in common even if the causes of those difficulties may sometimes be different:

'No, I should imagine it's difficult for both sexes. There's always a certain reluctance to speak out. There are all sorts of emotions involved. A person can feel very guilty, as though they're betraying the trust of the person that's abused them.' (Interviewee 21)

'I don't want to like, I think there are parallels, I'm sure women feel ashamed coming forward. I think it would be more fair to say, socially the way men are conditioned, it's harder to come and seek help. I think it's just harder for men to come and seek help for anything. And that's reinforced from a very early age, you're a boy, you're a man, the stiff upper lip approach basically. But I think, there's the issue of shame, and I'm sure that women have it, and men, but from a man's point of view, there's a lot of stigma, that you're getting beaten up by a woman, it's a hard thing to admit to yourself, let alone anyone else. They could retaliate, but they don't, you choose not to, you don't want to hit a woman. So, there's a lot of suppressed feelings, suppressed instincts, internal dilemmas, and it eats away at you inside, so there's a lot of parallels.' (Interviewee 28)

Many of the interviewees also felt that there was a lack of services, support and safe spaces for men to seek help and talk about experiences of violence and abuse. Some felt that this was at least in part as a result of government policies which have led to many different types of support services struggling or closing down due to a lack of funding. Others perceived it to be a result of the aforementioned 'gender bias' against men, feeling that this has led to many more services being provided for women than for men who are victims of domestic abuse. This connected to the use of an adversarial discourse towards different victim-survivors of domestic abuse described above, which is encouraged by some men's organisations. It highlights that such views could potentially be harmful, as they may encourage men to believe that there is no help available for them even when some services – such as the Men's Advice Line – do exist. Indeed, it is possible that the belief that there are no services available for men may sometimes give male victims a justification for their reluctance to seek help.

3.7 Improving services for men

The interviewees were also asked how they felt services for male victims and survivors of domestic abuse could be improved in the future. A central suggestion made in this respect was the need to raise awareness that men can be victims of domestic violence and other forms of abuse, that they can experience vulnerabilities in this way, and can be affected by psychological and emotional difficulties and mental health problems more broadly. As an extension to this, they also often felt that it was vital to raise awareness that there is support such as the Men's Advice Line available to men to help them deal with these issues, as currently a lot of men may simply not be aware that such services exist or where they can go to find them:

'Maybe more, advertising, because you, everybody hears about, you know, refuges for abused women, and then it's more talked about in the media, but I haven't, I wasn't aware of what's available for men.' (Interviewee 30)

One idea expressed by some of the participants which could help in this regard was to go to places where men are already spending their time, such as sporting contexts, to initiate awareness-raising campaigns and conversations:

'I just think there should be more services targeted at where men go to, there should be more services specifically targeted at them. A lot of men are into football and sports for example, so something could be done there, I don't know

how you would do it, maybe adverts on TV during football matches, that might be a bit too extravagant, or outside football stadiums, giving out leaflets outside football stadiums.' (Interviewee 11)

One point made here was that when promoting the helpline, it should be done in a way which helps men to recognise that they have been abused in the first place, rather than simply saying that the service is there for men who have experienced abuse:

'Advertise that it's, helping you to recognise that you've been abused, not to say, call in if you have been abused. Men don't know, and they're less likely to know. Also, a male pride point as well, like 'I'm the big strong man, she's not the big strong breadwinner, I can't be intimidated by a female.' I'm not talking about me here, but that's perhaps the general view.' (Interviewee 7)

Connected to this is the need to create more opportunities and spaces for men to open up, share their experiences and talk about their problems and difficulties, including in relation to experiences of domestic abuse, which was highlighted by several of the interviewees:

'If there were places men could go to, so they could talk. Where guys could go and share their experiences, I'd love to run something like that, if you could go somewhere where you could talk, around other people, other men, having similar issues, their experiences, how they deal with it.' (Interviewee 18)

Some of the participants pointed out that this means challenging the norms and expectations around masculinity that make it hard for men to do these things, encouraging them to ask one another more questions about how they are and what's going on in their lives, and being open to listening to and supporting other men around them if they are going through difficulties.

In a more formalised respect, many of the interviewees felt that there was a need for more support services aimed at men who are experiencing domestic abuse. Local services were highlighted as being particularly important in this respect – whilst many valued the support provided by the Men's Advice Line, frequently they felt that the obvious next step was to find more in-depth support locally, however this was not always available or not as substantial or as a specialist as they would have liked:

'There's nothing negative about the help that I received, nothing bad, everything's been good. I would love it if there was more services around where I live, more help, say for

instance if I could get that help that would make a big difference.' (Interviewee 10)

'Also, men to have more of their programmes, more locally. So I'm in Yorkshire, and with support services generally, and particularly for men, there's very little up here. There's a lack of services out there beyond a helpline.' (Interviewee 19)

It should be highlighted that the interviewees were typically not asking for domestic abuse services to support everyone in the same way regardless of gender – rather, they frequently seemed to want specialist services specifically tailored towards men where possible. Some of the participants did understand why existing services such as refuges for women did not provide support for men as well, and recognised that it would be inappropriate to ask them to do this.

'Of the 5 or 6 local services, the fact that only one accepts referrals from men at all, and still men and women, means that there's not a lot to go around. I think it would be helpful to have a service focusing specifically on men. A lot of people working in organisations that help victims of domestic abuse, might not be comfortable speaking with men, and that's absolutely fine, completely understandable, but that would be eliminated if there was a service specifically for men.' (Interviewee 26)

Finally, one of the interviewees suggested that it would be valuable for there to be a kind of kitemark or accreditation scheme for services to be able to show that they were trained in supporting male victims of violence and abuse:

'So I suppose it would be good if a service like the Men's Advice Line, had a standardised certificate, something that said, if I was trying a private counsellor locally, that said I've been made 'men's aware', I've been trained, I know the same sort of the language, I fit into the, a standardised system that says, yes, I've done this course. So, I guess once it passed, the type of advice service that there's...to be honest, for me finding something that I could guarantee would be good enough, it felt like quite a challenge. Not quite an 'autism aware' sticker, but something like that, which says yes, I'm male abuse aware, or male abuse trained, or something.' (Interviewee 19)

This underlines the importance of the Male Victims' Standard that Respect (2019) have recently launched.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This research project indicates that the Men's Advice Line and its staff are providing an excellent-quality service which is making a significant difference for the men who contact it. The thirty men we spoke to were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of contacting the helpline, as demonstrated by the average score of eight out of ten to describe their level of satisfaction with the service. Contacting the helpline and sharing their experiences with another person and being listened to and taken seriously in a non-judgemental and compassionate way was in and of itself a significant step forward for many of the men. However, many also took actions as a direct result of the call and the advice they received.

The research also provides new insights into how men's experiences of domestic abuse add complexities to our existing understandings and assumptions about the problem. These must be investigated further in careful and respectful ways, which recognise the wider context of gender inequality and the reality that the vast majority of coercive and controlling domestic abuse is perpetrated by men against women. An adversarial approach which pits male victims against women and women's services does little to help anyone in terms of enhancing our understanding of domestic abuse or developing more services for victim-survivors. Indeed, it can create the misleading impression among men that there are no services available for male victims at all, when patently this is not the case.

There is a great and urgent need for more specialist services for all victim-survivors of domestic violence, and this is something which organisations, practitioners and advocates across the domestic violence should campaign for. The interviews demonstrated the value of the specialist service that the Men's Advice Line provides, with helpline workers clearly highly skilled and trained in delivering support which is tailored to the complex and specific needs of men reporting domestic violence victimisation. The research therefore suggests that a generic 'gender-neutral' approach would do little to help male victims any more than women.

Another key issue raised by the research is the importance of challenging and changing dominant gender norms in society, and in particular in this case, expectations of masculinity. These norms, which frequently imply that it is 'unmanly' for men to be vulnerable or to ask for help, often appeared to be playing a significant role in men finding it difficult to take the step of seeking out support. It is therefore vital to encourage men and boys to feel that they can talk about problems in their lives, their relationships and in themselves; that men can be victims of violence and abuse and that is something which is unacceptable and should be taken seriously; and that there are services out there such as the Men's Advice Line which can support them. This underlines the importance of more education, campaigns

and awareness-raising about healthy relationships, gender norms and domestic violence across society, including within male-dominated contexts – something which was emphasised as a crucial step for society to take by several of the interviewees too.

The following are some recommendations based on the research findings for the further development of the Men's Advice Line in the future:

- Respect could partner with campaigns to question and challenge dominant gender norms, especially in relation to expectations of masculinity, for example within male-dominated spaces such as sports stadiums. This could also provide an opportunity to raise awareness about the Men's Advice Line, with several interviewees feeling that more could be done to make it known to men that the service exists. In addition, the helpline should be promoted in ways which recognise that men may not recognise that what they are experiencing is domestic violence or abuse.
- More information could be provided on the Men's Advice Line website and within promotional materials, and communicated to services that frequently refer men to the helpline, about exactly what the service it provides is and what it can and cannot do. In addition, the helpline should ensure as much as possible that all information about other services given to callers is accurate and up to date.
- More information could be provided on the Men's Advice Line website about domestic abuse and men's experiences of it, such as a 'frequently asked questions' section, as a way of encouraging men to build the understanding and confidence to contact the helpline.
- Respect could consider, where resources allow, providing more opportunities for men to contact the helpline outside of working hours, in evenings and/or at the weekend.
- The queuing system for the helpline could be reviewed and changed if it is possible for callers to regularly lose their place in the queue without prior warning.
- Where resources allow, any time limits placed on calls could be reviewed and potentially expanded to try to ensure that calls are not ended arbitrarily if the service user is not ready for this to happen. The Men's Advice Line could also investigate possibilities for initiating a follow-up phone call within a few weeks of the original call for service users that might particularly benefit from this.
- More awareness could be raised among frontline workers as well as among men and boys in the general public that they can contact the helpline for help and advice, given the considerable confusion and misinformation which exists around men's experiences of domestic violence.
- Respect should ensure that helpline workers continue to be trained to a high standard both in interpersonal, communication and support

skills, and in dealing with the complexities of domestic violence, understanding its gendered dynamics, and men's experiences of it. Furthermore, Respect could share the good practice modelled by the Men's Advice Line as much as possible to ensure that other services can learn from this exemplary work and respond similarly effectively to men reporting experiences of domestic violence. The Respect Male Victims' Standard is a vital way of doing this.

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6. Annex I – Interview topic guide

1. In brief, what led you to make contact with the Men's Advice Line?

- Prompt: Was there anything in particular that eventually prompted you to make contact?

2. How did you hear about the Men's Advice Line?

- Prompt: Do you think there's anything that could be done to make more people aware that it exists?

3. Did you find it easy to make contact with the Men's Advice Line?

- Prompt: Were the opening hours suitable for your needs?
- Prompt: Were you able to get through on your first attempt?
- Prompt: Was this the first time you had talked about these issues with someone?

4. What were you hoping for by calling the Men's Advice Line? Would you say you received this?

- Prompt: How helpful have other services you have interacted with been?

5. On a scale of 1–10, how satisfied were you with your experience of contacting the Men's Advice Line, and why?

6. Did you take any actions as a result of the call? If so, what?

- Prompt: What have you found helpful?

7. Is there any way in which you think the service provided by the Men's Advice Line could be improved?

8. Do you think it's more difficult for men who experience domestic abuse to ask for help compared with women?

- Prompt: What specifically gives you that impression?
- Prompt: Would you say that you have experienced any particular barriers or difficulties in speaking about your experiences?

9. If there was one thing which could be done to improve services for male victims of domestic abuse, what do you think it should be?

Demographic questions:

- What is your ethnicity?
- How old are you?
- Which region of the UK do you live in?

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